

# COURAGE: Transforming Aging Through Impact Networks

## What are impact networks?

Impact networks were initially described by David Ehrlichman in his book *Impact Networks: Create Connection, Spark Collaboration, and Catalyze Systemic Change*. Ehrlichman defines impact networks as a living-systems approach to solving social and environmental challenges using a flexible organizing system that spans regions, teams and silos.

Impact networks leverage how people naturally connect, emphasizing the need to bring people together to build relationships while taking advantage of existing work, ideas and skills. They are purpose driven and can “accelerate learning, spark collaboration and catalyze system change.”<sup>1</sup>

Ehrlichman describes three primary forms of impact networks.

- **Learning networks** focus on the exchange of information, providing participants with peer support and insights on how to adapt knowledge to their individual challenges. Many communities of practice can be described as a learning network.
- **Action networks** go beyond just knowledge sharing, enabling participants to address complex issues through working partnerships and shared decision-making. Participants often advance collaborative action by forming project teams, working groups or task forces.
- **Movement networks** emerge when multiple impact networks work together on aligned priorities to pursue broad scale action. Participants in this network-to-network approach operate with varying levels of semi-autonomy, but often a core network will exist to provide leadership and steward the collaborative efforts.

## COURAGE’s impact networks approach

[COURAGE: Action for Better Aging](#) is a national initiative led by Covenant and SE Health, that invites Canadians invested in healthy aging to reimagine the future of aging in our country, spark innovation, and forge an action plan for change. Our goal is to ensure Canadians can live full, active lives in their communities as they age.

Reimagining aging in Canada is a complex endeavour that no single actor or organization can address alone. As such, **COURAGE** applied an impact network approach at several stages by bringing together individuals and groups spanning numerous professions, sectors and experiences to advance learning, collaboration and action for transformative change.

A learning network was established during **COURAGE**’s initial engagement phase by hosting 122 engagement activities with over 800 contacts across Canada who had an interest in aging. Those engaged included, but were not limited to, community and social services, health, research and education, government, innovators and technology providers, financial institutions as well as older adults, their families and their care partners.

COURAGE continued to leverage this learning network during the collaboration phase by bringing together 181 changemakers at a national summit to consider the four key recommendations identified during the earlier engagement. This event culminated in 16 concrete actions that support those recommendations. These are summarized in COURAGE'S [Roadmap for Action](#).

During COURAGE's action phase, the learning network evolved into an action network as stakeholders were asked to endorse the *Roadmap for Action*. The resulting coalition began to implement the concrete actions defined earlier by engaging in research, co-creation, and document development and review. Members contributed based on their ability, capacity and areas of interest or expertise.

A dedicated coalition of more than 350 changemakers emerged that would represent COURAGE: Action for Better Aging. Bringing these stakeholders together not only provided an opportunity to reach existing networks, but also provided a forum for new, multi-hub networks to form when the resources, mission or objectives of these stakeholders aligned. Thus, the COURAGE initiative evolved into a movement network.

## Broad potential of impact networks

The concept of impact networks has helped guide several successful collaborative initiatives. Recently in Canada, the Saskatchewan Health Quality Council's [Thrive at Home Action Community](#) emerged from an intentional impact network approach to address the issues facing older adults in Saskatchewan.<sup>2</sup> With the goal of improving community-based care and supports for older Saskatchewan adults, their impact network began when over 100 health and community leaders engaged in collaborative workshops. The Thrive at Home Action Community that resulted from these efforts continues as a structured network for brainstorming innovative solutions to aging well.

The Australian Centre for Social Innovation produced a white paper that explored other impact network success stories, including [Food Solutions New England's](#) food systems sustainability network that spans six states and the [Santa Cruz Mountain Stewardship Network](#) that coordinates 24 organizations' efforts to protect the region's ecosystem.<sup>3</sup> They also reviewed their own experience applying an impact network approach to create [The Good Death Impact Network](#), an Australia-based, 90 member group that meets monthly to address issues relating to ageism, death denial and the need to improve death literacy.

## Getting started with impact networks

An early step to developing an impact network is to identify the individuals, organizations and sectors with a vested interest in the topic or issue you wish to address. Depending on what that topic or issue might be, these potential participants could be relatively few and therefore easy to identify or might be more numerous and require a concerted exploratory effort. In the latter case, you could engage in an iterative scoping exercise or a more formal stakeholder analysis to identify these potential participants. For the COURAGE initiative, a cascading and iterative approach was adopted, ultimately engaging over 1,300 Canadians throughout the journey in a collective effort to reimagine aging.

Participants will help define the type of impact network they would benefit from. If they are seeking opportunities to connect with one another and share information, a learning network should provide a forum for the exchange of learnings both among participants and between participants and outside sources. This could be facilitated via newsletters or other publications, webinars and network calls, or by using social media. In early stages, COURAGE gathered and shared information through interviews, online surveys and focus groups. After the coalition had formed, information continued to be solicited and shared via COURAGE's monthly *Action Updates*. COURAGE also held virtual 'jam' sessions to bring coalition members together to share, learn and co-create.

An action network goes beyond the flow of information and provides the opportunity for network participants to ‘lean in’ and ‘lean out’ based on interest, knowledge, skills and capacity. It is key that participants are encouraged to adopt a network mindset, where each recognizes the importance of building trust with one another and that every participant can contribute to the shared goal. Instead of a traditional hierarchical structure, impact networks should be heterarchical—where numerous network participants are empowered to make decisions and drive action. One way that **COURAGE** applied this approach was to have collaborative feedback sessions with subject matter experts and coalition members to inform the development of the [\*360 Living Models Blueprint\*](#).

Network leaders will naturally emerge who can identify early opportunities for learning and collaboration among participants. The role of network leaders includes helping guide participants to identify their shared purpose, facilitating opportunities for participants to work together and fostering relationships between participants and clusters. One or more network leaders may also take on the responsibility of coordinating group work into internal systems and structures to inform participants. For **COURAGE**, the two primary network leaders were Covenant and SE Health.

A quick guide to creating an impact network can be found in what Ehrlichman calls the five core activities, or the five C’s:

1. Clarify purpose and principles
2. Convene people
3. Cultivate trust
4. Coordinate actions
5. Collaborate for systems change

## Lessons Learned

Having applied an impact networks approach at various stages, **COURAGE** identified the following learnings:

- Impact networks are a powerful tool. Stakeholders engaged early in the process provided significant insight and guidance. They also introduced us to more individuals and organizations who together encompassed a vast variety of perspectives and areas of expertise.
- Language matters. For example, we quickly learned how polarizing the word advocacy is. While some felt it was simply a strategy for promoting awareness, others felt that it was more related to lobbying.
- Shared leadership requires a strong backbone. While there was a strong appetite to share information and inform recommendations, there was often desire for project creators to provide direction and guidance. This can shift priorities and extend deadlines.
- The art of co-creation is invaluable. The **COURAGE** impact network has been integral to moving initial engagement from the brainstorming of recommendations and suggested actions to real, meaningful action. We truly are stronger together and can reach further!

## References

<sup>1</sup> Ehrlichman, D. (2021). *Impact Networks: Create Connection, Spark Collaboration, and Catalyze Systemic Change*. United Kingdom: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

<sup>2</sup> Justine Cleghorn. (January 22, 2025). *Uniting for change: The power of networks in supporting healthy aging*. Saskatchewan Health Quality Council.

<sup>3</sup> The Australian Centre for Social Innovation. (n.d.) *White paper: Building networks for systemic impact*.